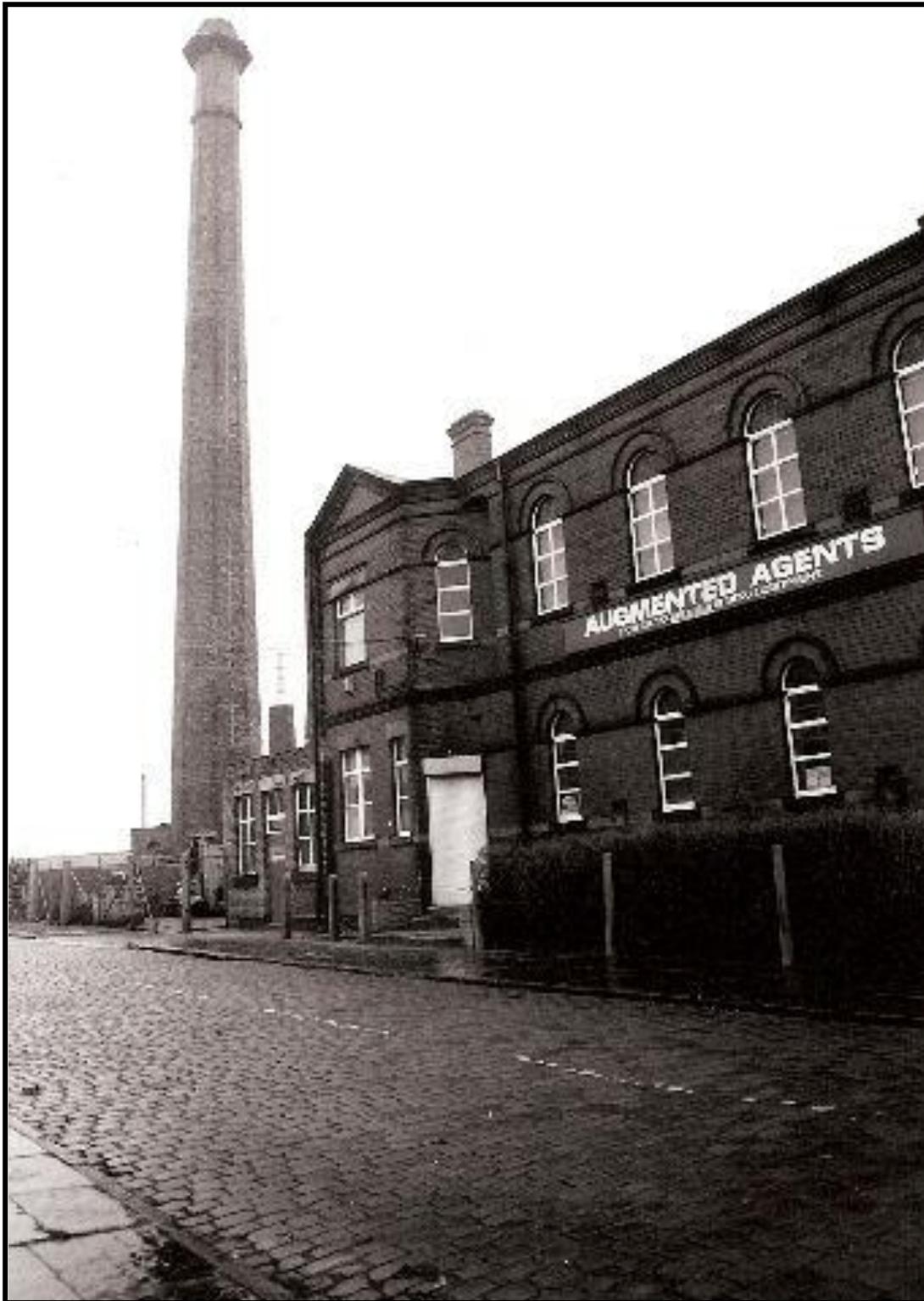


FRED DIBNAH'S CHIMNEY DROPS

LANCASHIRE HILL MILL CHIMNEY DROP, STOCKPORT.

Sunday 2nd April 1989



Lancashire Hill Mill, Stockport. The superb 180 feet tall, octagonal, brick chimney with its distinctive ornamented oversiller was photographed just two hours before Fred Dibnah's demolition on 2nd April 1989.

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It was very cold, and a mixture of sleet and rain was falling on the Sunday morning of the 2nd of April 1989 as I was trundling in my Isuzu Trooper along the busy, traffic-choked A6 in Manchester, heading down to Stockport to witness and hopefully take part in another of Fred Dibnah's amazing chimney felling jobs at Lancashire Hill Mill.

After driving through Levenshulme, and upon passing the biscuit factory on my right, I could feel the 'sap' rising in my body; the sheer thrill and intense excitement of the forthcoming dramatic event always made me react like this. I just loved every minute of Fred's chimney demolition jobs. For I was truly in heaven when drinking in the 'special atmosphere' that pervade these old mill sites. It was like a drug; a fix.

I found it exhilarating, exciting: a mixture of intense excitement, laced with profound danger, and tremendous respect for my friend Fred's skills in engineering precisely the felling of the chimney to drop exactly as planned. I also felt, very much like Fred, profound sadness too, for these chimneys were masterpieces of the Victorian mill-builders art. They had served Britain well, and now they were no longer required, 'no longer loved' as Fred eloquently put it, and therefore, had to be demolished and cleared away.

On reaching Lancashire Hill, I could see a short distance ahead, the tall latticework steel jib of the demolition company's crane towering above a block of time-blackened brick mill buildings. I pulled off the Manchester Road down a cobbled, mean-looking street and into the mill yard, where I then safely parked the Isuzu Trooper several

hundred feet away from the demolition activities. I had previously carried out a little research into the history of Lancashire Hill Mill, which revealed that it had been built as a cotton spinning manufactory by Thomas Rivett in 1887, passing into the ownership of Joseph Rivett and Sons in 1897 and being known as the Lancashire Hill Thread Works. The business was subsequently taken over by The Fine Cotton Spinners and Doublers Association.

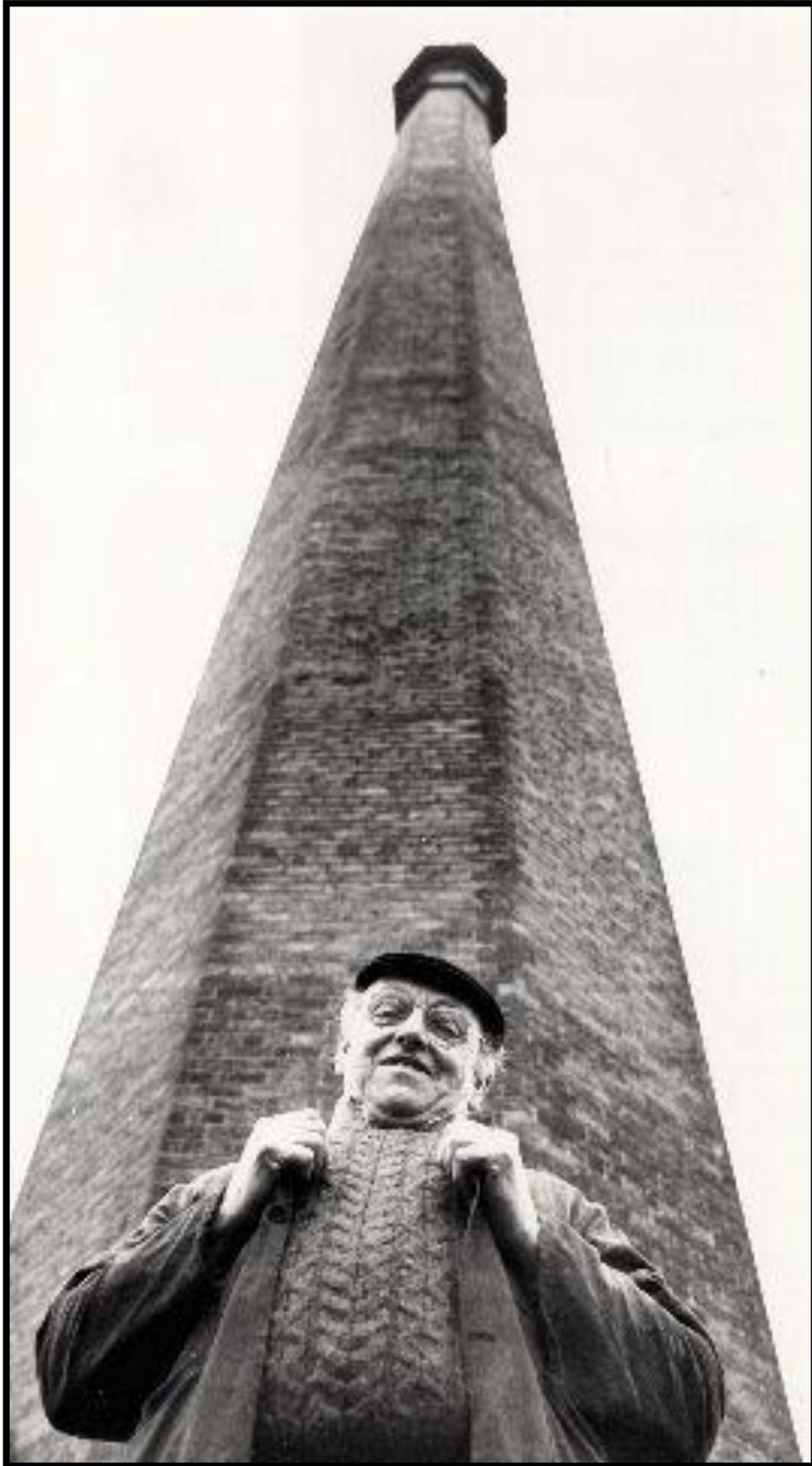
The wind had picked up driving sleet flurries hither, thither and the temperature was dropping rapidly. Fred most definitely would not be pleased with the strength of the wind, I thought. Prior to walking across the mill yard to where the 180 feet tall, octagonal brick chimney was sited, I decided, that as I was on site a good hour earlier than planned, I may as well do a little bit of exploring hereabouts.

I walked over to the rear of the yard where there was a substantial brick wall which divided the mill site from the canal towpath on the other side. I then noticed that a section of the wall had been damaged, resulting in it being reduced from its original height of about twelve feet into a pile of rubble. Walking over to this mound, I could look down into the Stockport Canal, the surface of the water being partially frozen into sheets of ice. Clambering atop the mound of bricks, I attained a birds eye view across the canal of the decomposing millscapes that fanned out towards Stockport town centre. "Hells Teeth", I muttered. "This area of Stockport must have been an industrial powerhouse". I retraced my steps back to the Isuzu to collect my Olympus camera and to find Fred.



Thomas Rivett's Lancashire Hill Thread Works letterhead dated 20th May 1884.
Courtesy of Stockport Library of Local Studies

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A delightful characteristic image of Master Steeplejack Fred Dibnah posing proudly beneath the Lancashire Hill Mill chimney prior to demolition.

Chris Hill Collection.

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However, Fred found me first. *"Hiya cock. Despite this bloody awful weather you've made it then. I bet its ten foot deep in snow up on them Yorkshire moors where you live",* said Fred *"Int it bloody windy?, I just wish t'wind would settle down. It can be reet bloody scary tha knows, bein' close to a big chimney with the bumfire rapidly burning away the pit-props. The wind can play havoc with the chimney drop. You can't always guarantee if the sodding chimney will actually fall, the fire might have burnt out, leaving the stack standing, but sort of trembling like, due to the wind. Reet deadly stuff".* "At least the damned sleet has stopped", I cheerfully replied. We both walked towards the tall, octagonal brick stack, which still retained its most attractive, large and ornate oversiller.

"What a bonny chimney Fred. It's a tragedy that it is to be felled" said I. **"Aye ,th' poor bugger is no longer loved. As you know Alan,**

I don't like knocking 'em down either, but I've got to live. If I don't knock 'em down, then some other guy will. T'demolition contractor was going to blow it up, but the bigwigs from the health and safety wouldn't let them. This is how I got the job. They seem to trust me with my sticks and bumfire routine. It's bloody sad, but it's got to go".

Fred and his mates had carried out the 'gobbing out' process earlier that week and I counted over twenty stout timber props supporting the towering mass of masonry that soared 180 feet above. The square brickwork chimney base had at some time in its life been spray-can daubed with Anglo-Saxon profanities and weird hieroglyphics. Very photogenic!

With just a half-hour to spare before the ceremonial lighting of the demolition bonfire, I got stuck in with Fred and other acquaintances enthusiastically stacking timber and old lorry tyres amongst the pit-props holding up the chimney.



On the morning of the drop, Fred and fellow steeplejack Eddie Chattwood are hard at work boring holes into the pit props. These holes assist the flames to rapidly consume the timber. Notice to the left hand side the original flue. Fred's old Landrover workhorse, his 'Lanny' is parked to the rear.

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Surrounded by a bizarre collection of graffiti daubed onto the brickwork of the chimney base, Fred can be seen calculating the load of the towering masonry upon the pit props with his trammel points.

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Fred's second wife Susan, ignited the Lancashire Hill Mill's chimney funeral pyre at bang on 11 o'clock. Notwithstanding the rain-soaked bonfire material, the flames soon took hold, the strong wind inducing the flames up into the chimney's throat. Thick, black smoke issued out from the

doomed chimney's decorative top. From my safe vantage point behind a massive steel demolition contractor's skip sited several hundreds of feet away from the chimney, I could hear the fire roaring within the barrel.



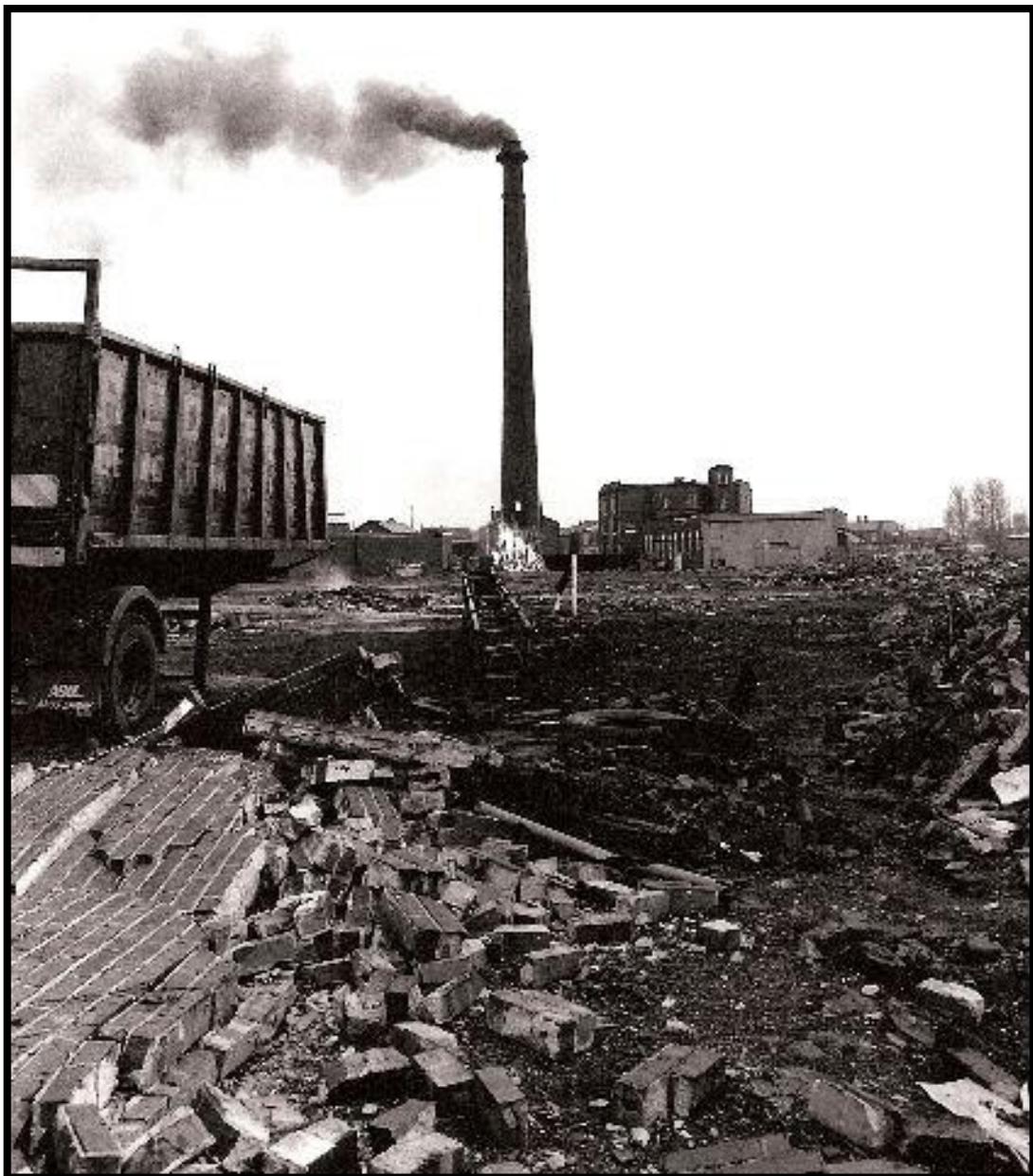
The scene is set. The bonfire has been built under the chimney. Most of the on-lookers have moved to a safe position whilst a number of brave young souls can be seen milling about in the actual path of the chimney drop.

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I glanced at my watch, 11.15 a.m. I couldn't see Fred for he was located at the rear of the chimney base, undoubtedly watching carefully for the tell-tale cracks that heralded the fall. I fired off several shots with my Olympus. **"Parp, parp.....parp"** Fred's airhorn. **"Hell's Teeth! Its going over."** A split second later and I noticed the chimney buckle, then lean in what appeared to be 'slow motion', then over it went to crash onto the wet yard with an almighty roar. It had taken just sixteen and a half minutes from the lighting of the bonfire for the mighty 102 year old chimney to fall. The whole demolition of the stack had been expertly carried out by Fred and all that remained was a smouldering mountain of brick rubble fanning out in a precise path, exactly as Fred had calculated.

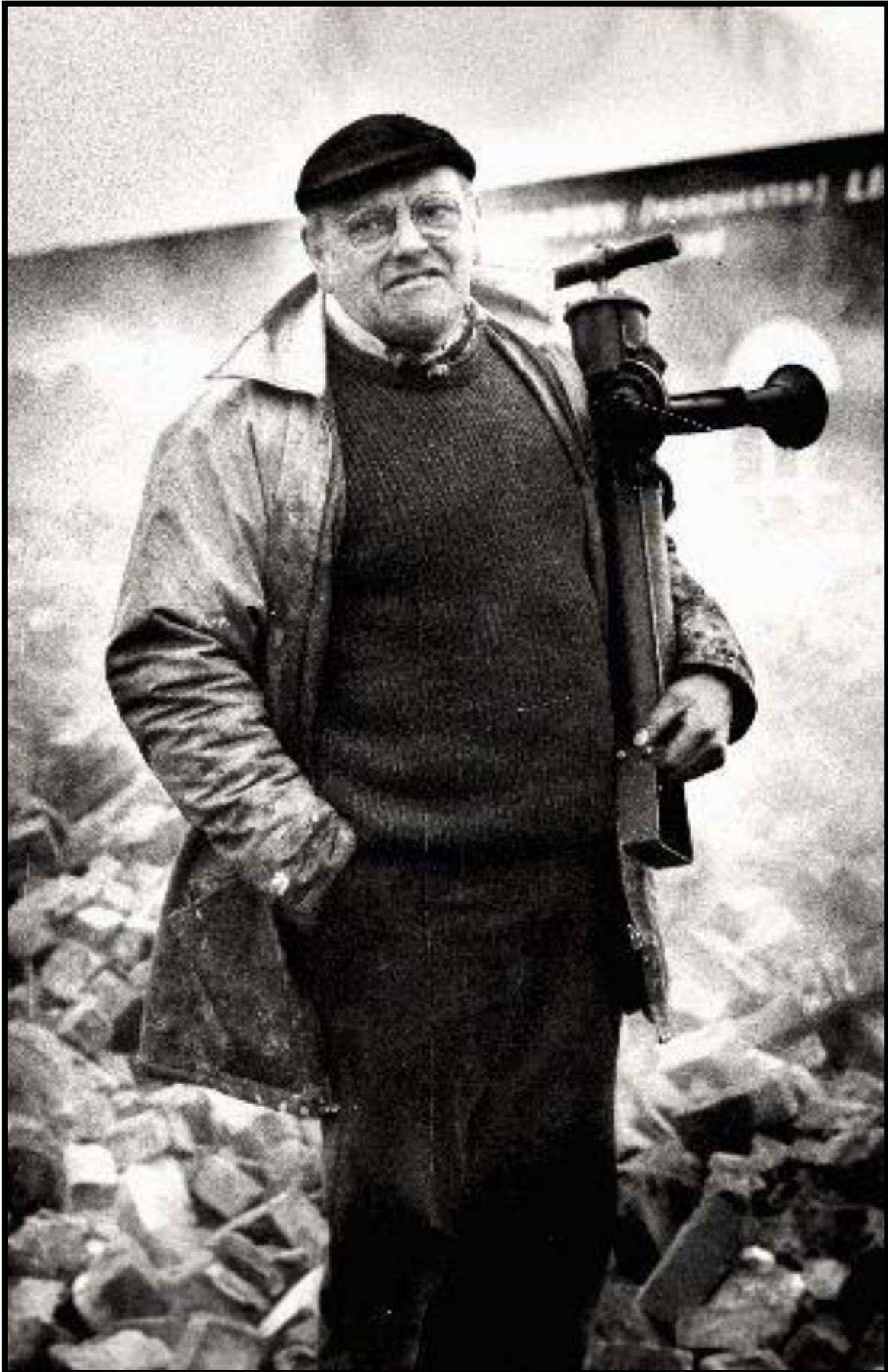
Later, I spoke with Alan Johnson, a director of Reddish Demolition Limited, whom Fred was working for. Alan was clearly delighted with Fred's safe and efficient felling of the chimney. "It was a spectacular performance which really brought the house down" he said. He explained that his company had been refused permission to blow down the chimney with explosives by their insurance company and due to Fred's unrivalled reputation regarding safe and efficient working practices, his firm had placed a contract with the famous steeplejack. So despite the awful weather conditions, the Lancashire Hill Mill chimney drop went extremely well. The huge rain-soaked crowd of Fred's admirers that had boldly attended gave Fred a resounding cheer and he was clearly delighted.



Across a wilderness of brick rubble and smashed concrete the bonfire can be seen blazing furiously; black smoke issues forth from the decorative chimney top.

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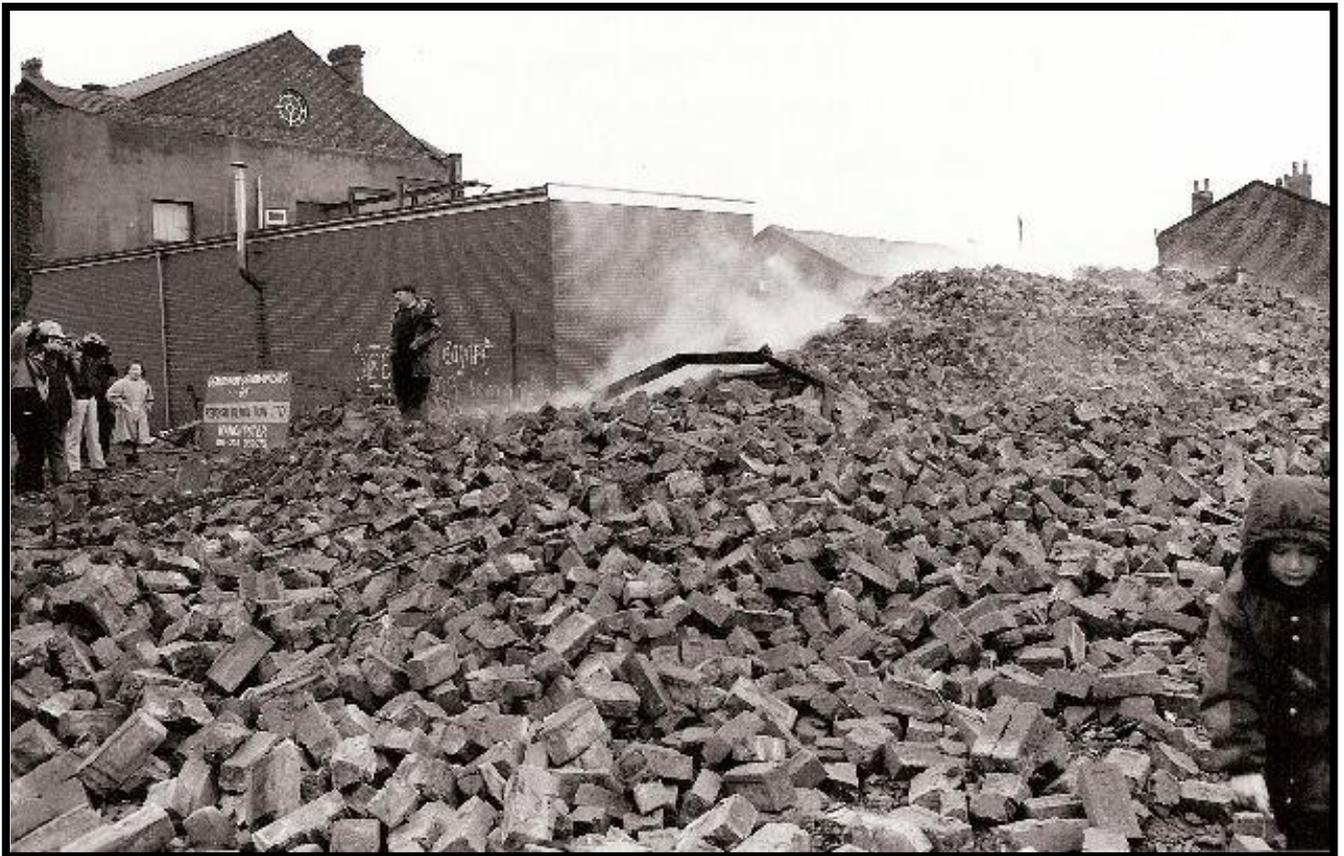
Fred with his beloved, trusty air operated klaxon.
Chris Hill Collection.

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Just 16½ minutes after the bonfire was lit the chimney was no more.
Chris Hill Collection.

During the afternoon our close-knit band of chimney buffs and friends celebrated the event in the time-honoured fashion by supping a few Guinnesses at Fred's home, back in Bolton.



A triumphant Fred poses for photographers on a mountain of brick rubble, all that now remains of the Lancashire Hill Mill chimney.

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